

# ***Combating gender stereotypes in the educational system***

Teresa Alvarez (Portugal)  
Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality  
CEMRI/Open University

This paper aims to bring to this conference some reflections on sexist stereotypes in the education system, by addressing some relevant issues and some of the most appropriate strategies to combat them, at the present time, from my point of view.

## **1. What do we mean by combating gender stereotypes in school?**

Combating gender stereotypes in education means to question and to deconstruct them. Not to eliminate them.

Societies remain strongly gender stereotyped and sexism is far from having been eliminated from contemporary societies' organization and functioning and from social and interpersonal relationships between men and women. Thus, education system, as any other social subsystem (employment, health, social security) is and has to be gender stereotyped and has to reproduce sexist ways of thinking, being and acting.

My first question is:

Combating gender stereotypes should not be centred only on education system without taking into account its relationship with the society that creates, maintains and needs it. One of the challenges of public policies for gender equality is to rethink a systemic approach of inequality between man and women and to design, put into action, assess and follow-up lines of action strategically convergent (in first place) and concerted (in second place). In addition to the implementation of sectoral policies, we need non-compartmentalised policies which usually follow the organization of the state and public administration. Gender mainstreaming in the education system should be also based on a systemic vision of education and gender socialization. That means that it should be implemented in inter and multi-sectoral ways and not only in sectoral ways. It is not an easy task and this remains certainly as one of our challenges.

## **2. The obstacles to combatting gender stereotypes in school**

We need stereotypes to deal with the complexity of the reality. The problem of gender stereotypes is that, since they are social stereotypes, they are applied to persons, serving to identify a girl or a boy as belonging to a certain group (feminine sex or masculine sex) and to interact, almost immediately, with him or her not in accordance with what each of them is but on the basis of what we believe women and men are.

The gender stereotypes dichotomy makes them especially reductive of human being. In educational terms, gender stereotypes are converted into pre-judgments and expectations about children and teenagers, according to dominant conceptions of men and women, which prevail over their own individuality and their human potentials: gender stereotypes lead us to avoid, restrict or make difficult the development of some of those potentials but they lead us also to press and force the development of potentials that we believe make part of their person. These expectations lead to very subtle and sublimated education strategies at school that are differentiated<sup>1</sup> according to dominant and hegemonic conceptions of femininity and of masculinity and of woman and men. As we know, this constrains individual and social development of children and teenagers of both sexes (VIEIRA, 2006).

The structural elements of gender stereotypes are still:

- girls' education to care: their universe and environments, for instance visual (shapes, colours), material (the objects they see and they use) and entertainment (toys, books, films, games) go on focused, most of all, on the value of motherhood. Girls' identities are constructed by being attentive to the *others*. The absence of an interior consent to give their own interests the same legitimacy that they give to the interests of others is the main subjective obstacle to the empowerment of girls and women (CORIA, 2005).

- boys' education to dominance: their universe and environments (visual, material, entertainment) go on focused on the necessity of rejecting femininity and on self-assertion, expressed in dominating situations, objects and persons. The construction of boys' identity is self-centred. Individual rivalry and competition, as well as relationships in a non-affective basis, are for the boys a subjective obstacle to concern for others.

My second question concerns the challenge that school must address to encourage girls' self-value and empowerment and boys' skills to care (of oneself and the others).

### **3. To combat or reproduce gender inequality at school**

Another aspect of gender stereotypes, common to some others social stereotypes, such as racial ones, is its asymmetric value. Many of human traits, seen as masculine, have a positive social value, which means that they are socially desirable for any adult. On the contrary, most of human traits seen as feminine have no such value and remain not desirable for all adults (some of them have a specific positive value and are socially desirable for women only). This explains that human beings and human societies go on being represented, conceived and nominated based on a male conception of individual and of citizen (SCOTT, 2006).

---

<sup>1</sup> This begins in the family but in a much more explicit way.

Furthermore, this symbolic hierarchy "naturalizes", both in boys and girls, asymmetrical power relationships between them and, later on, social inequality between men and women, justifying the mechanisms of domination (and of discrimination). At school, boys still dominate "spaces and noises"; girls go on occupying the margins of physical space and remain attentive to the effects of others' actions.

It is a fact that education systems have been the main generators of more equality among youth and teenagers of both sexes changing relationships between them. Boys and girls access, enjoy and benefit from the same resources provided by the school. However, we cannot forget that this equality has been rooted in a greater appropriation of male normativity by girls and not in the incorporation of feminine traits by boys.

My third question is:

The coherence between what defines gender equality (valuing human diversity and being aware that feminine and masculine are dimensions of any human being) and how we act towards this equality at school. When we focus on questioning gender stereotypes and when we try to promote effective equality between girls and boys, it becomes important to understand if we are giving the same value to human traits seen as feminine and human traits seen as masculine or if we are<sup>2</sup>, even without intention, developing new mechanisms of social devaluation. If we exclude what we see as specific to femininity and girls we are encouraging girls to appropriate masculine behavioural norms but not raising awareness among boys of the value of female behavioural norms.

#### **4. School, knowledge and reproduction of the gender stereotypes**

This andocentric representation of the world and humanity continues to be conveyed by the school through knowledge (ALVAREZ, 2008). This has two well-known consequences: boys' identification with this knowledge, which is grounded in large and diverse masculine models of human being and possibilities of individual and social life; girls' disaffection from this knowledge, which means they have very few models to with whom to identify. What is taught and learned at school always regards boys but rarely concerns girls. In this knowledge, male issues are always present and female issues are almost absent; men (and so boys) are always involved or directly touched; women (and so girls) are most of the times outsiders or observers (MOSCONI, 2010).

The kind of contents we select to be learnt reinforce very often gender stereotypes due to convergence between them and other social stereotypes in which knowledge is also

---

<sup>2</sup> And perhaps due to a more evident lack of girls' and women's rights.

based, such as those of leadership, family, care, technology, work and many others<sup>3</sup>. This relationship reinforces, silently but successfully, gender stereotypes (PINTO, 2013).

My fourth issue is about knowledge:

When we select what we want to be taught and to be learnt at school, we also select prevailing conceptions about those contents. This establishes the place given to women and men and, consequently, the degree of integration or exclusion of each sex and the importance given to their relationships.

### **5. New challenges to combat gender stereotypes in education system**

The crystallization of gender stereotypes creates significant contradictions with social dynamics and social changes in men's and women's lives and in the relationships between men and women and within each group.

Western societies witnessed deep changes in men's and women's spaces and social roles and in power relationships between them<sup>4</sup>. However, the results of these changes are not acquired, they are not irreversible and, more importantly, they are not consistent with other social changes that occur simultaneously.

Nowadays, children's socialization is more sexualized than before. This process begins earlier and is more coherent and more omnipresent than in the past. It contradicts the present trend towards diversity, equality and the making freed choices by men and women. It has significant effects in children's growth because it shapes their physical spaces; clothing; toys; games; stories; books and advertising, among others.

This sexual segregation (girls / boys) is grounded in gender stereotypes and reinforces the conception of human dichotomy that has been questioned by gender concept.

At the same time, combating gender stereotypes in education system has to cope with new problems. Nowadays, school is not the only one which plays an important role of in socializing as was the case several years ago. New socialization contexts emerged and have been developed.

These contexts are widely used, consumed and frequented by children and teenagers of both sexes, largely because of the significant increase, diversification and democratization of consumption, stimulated by marketing and economic competition and made available by communication technologies. Spaces of entertainment, music and Internet, including multimedia products (video clips) and virtual social networks (blogs, Facebook, twitter) are contexts and means of socialization that offer, or appear to offer, much more

---

<sup>3</sup> These are closely linked to social conceptions of masculine and feminine and are implicitly associated with dominant and hegemonic conceptions of men and women.

<sup>4</sup> First in public spaces (regarding women) and secondly, but more slowly, in private spaces (in relation to men).

individual freedom. However, male and female prevailing norms are transposed into these new contexts.

Sexist stereotypes are reproduced through a wider range of resources and contexts of socialization but in a more sophisticated and underhanded way. So, they often have more punitive effects on those who break or undermine gender norms.

My fifth issue is:

How can school coexist and interact with these other "spaces" preparing children for being able to use and question them, critically and from a gender perspective. The *Young People Combating Hate Speech Online* project launched by the Council of Europe in 2012 gave political visibility to this issue. It has involved many schools in many countries. It is an important step forward.

## **6. Strategies and lines of action to combat gender stereotypes in education**

We know that education systems reproduce gender stereotypes in various ways. I will highlight five:

- Curriculum, including course contents and knowledge;
- Teachers' training and other professional groups' training: non-teaching staff such as administrative and support staff; school psychologists; school and vocational guidance teachers; special education teachers.
- Pedagogical practices (individual and collective): disciplinary (in class) and interdisciplinary, such as schools' projects; teaching materials, including textbooks and digital resources;
- School culture, including communication within and outside school, physical spaces' organization;
- Relationship with the community, especially families, municipalities and organizations of civil society.

Pedagogical practices and educational materials have been the centre of attention in applying gender equality actions to school systems. Teacher training is regarded as a crucial and strategic priority of equality policies.

It remains essential to rethink gendered interactions, power relationships and sexist normative behaviours that take place in different school spaces, both formal and informal. However, combating gender stereotypes in the education system should focus on its irreplaceable role: the construction of knowledge.

If knowledge about the world and humanity integrates and values men and women equally and highlights how they build and rebuild the relationships between them and within each of them, this knowledge becomes more comprehensive and closer to reality and incorporates a larger range of models of human being. This is an essential condition for both, girls and boys, to claim the same right to choose their school careers, professional careers and life projects.

It is therefore important **that knowledge becomes a central strategy in combating gender stereotypes in school**, ensuring that:

- Curricula and course contents are structured according to the scientific knowledge produced by Women's Studies and Gender Studies, in an effective, consistent and systematic manner. In 2000 the Council of Europe published *Teaching 20<sup>th</sup> century women's history: a classroom approach*, by Ruth Tudor. This is a good example.
- Curricula and course contents are consistent with social reality and the diversity of life of women and men;
- Curricula and course contents make education for citizenship and democracy central, structuring them around gender equality.

Knowledge has an emancipating role. It gives us the capacity for critical reflection and allows each of us to question gender stereotypes, to challenge social dynamics and to change reality.

But this kind of action can only be done with:

- The collaboration of researchers from different scientific fields, with a consolidated work in the area of Women's and Gender's Studies, higher education teachers and trainers with extensive experience in initial training and in-service training of primary and secondary teachers;
- The involvement of teachers from primary and secondary schools.

**These strategies require a set of lines of action.** I will highlight just three:

The first is that the new approaches must form part of the curriculum and be included in what teachers do every day. This means that any intervention in the education system should not mean an extra load on teaching. When gender equality issues and relationships between men and women are integrated into course contents, many of these contents become more appealing and understandable to students, becoming closer to them and to their lives (CARDONA, 2013, PINTO, 2013).

The second is that we need to know the impact of teacher training in school. The assessment of the training courses should focus not only on individual changes in teachers' practices but also on their impact in the entire school.

The third is that teacher training remains crucial as many countries testify.

- Initial training (scientific and pedagogical) should ensure that the curriculum of higher education and academia in general should incorporate Women's and Gender's Studies; unfortunately, this is not generally the case.
- Continuous training must be designed and developed in a logic of continuity and deepening, both theoretical and practical, requiring practical work with students and, after that, critical reflection on the work done. Teachers' awareness on gender issues occurs when they are confronted with their students and realize the added value that gender equality issues bring to learning.

The bases for the implementation of these action lines are:

- Stable technical and scientific teams (not just working groups);
- Institutional partnerships based on shared responsibility and full involvement of all partners;
- Networking must be sustained and renewed;
- Attention to the priorities and changes in the education system and integrated responses to these priorities.

#### Bibliographic References

ALVAREZ, Teresa (2008), "Las mujeres n la Historia enseñada en Portugal: avances y resistencias. E la investigación a la enseñanza" in AAVV, *La Igualdad no es una Utopia . Nuevas Fronteras: avances y desafíos. Conferencias Plenarias / Equality is not an Utopia. New Frontiers: challenges and changes. Plenary Lectures*, Madrid, Women's Words 2008, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, pp. 16-20.

CARDONA, Maria João (ed) (2013), *Education Guide: Gender and Citizenship. Pre-school*, CIG, [online] available in [http://www.cig.gov.pt/pdf/2014/Education\\_Guide\\_Pre\\_school.pdf](http://www.cig.gov.pt/pdf/2014/Education_Guide_Pre_school.pdf) [seen on 20 September 2014].

CORIA, Clara (2005), "Incidencia del género en las negociaciones cotidianas y obstáculos subjetivos que obturan el acceso a una ciudadanía plena. ¿el género mujer condiciona una ciudadanía fantasma?" in Ana Rincón (coord.) *Congreso Internacional Sare 2004: "¿Hacia qué modelo de ciudadanía?"*, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Emakunde, pp. 223-230.

MOSCONI, Nicole (2010), "Filles et garçons. Éducation à l'égalité ou transmission de stéréotypes sexistes?" *L'école et la ville*, n°4.

PINTO, Teresa (ed.) (2013), *Education Guide: Gender and Citizenship. 3rd cycle*, CIG, [online] available in [http://www.cig.gov.pt/pdf/2014/Education\\_Guide\\_3rd\\_Cicle.pdf](http://www.cig.gov.pt/pdf/2014/Education_Guide_3rd_Cicle.pdf) [seen on 20 September 2014].

SCOOT, Joan W. (2006), “El movimiento por la paridad : un reto al universalismo francés” in Cristina Borderías (ed.) *Joan Scott y las políticas de la Historia*, Madrid, AEIHM, pp. 13-39.

VIEIRA, Cristina (2006), *É Menino ou Menina? Género e Educação em Contexto Familiar*, Porto, Almedina.